



‘Peter Pan and Wendy’ adapter takes science on an awfully big adventure

By **Cella Wren**

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Peter Pan’s comrade Wendy Darling has traditionally been portrayed as mother to the Lost Boys and rival to a jealous Tinker Bell — not as a fledgling scientist. But then Lauren Gunderson got involved.

Gunderson, 37, the adapter of Shakespeare Theatre Company’s “Peter Pan and Wendy,” is the most-produced dramatist in America this season, not counting Shakespeare. She has authored a range of works, from Jane Austen pastiches to a postmodern black-comic riff on the French Revolution. But Gunderson’s particular specialty is plays about historical female scientists: “The Half-Life of Marie Curie” is now off-Broadway; “Silent Sky,” about female astronomers in the early 1900s, opens in January at Ford’s Theatre; and “Ada and the Engine,” the story of the 19th-century mathematician Ada Lovelace, will be staged by Avant Bard Theatre starting in March.

J.M. Barrie’s heroine might not seem to fit this pattern, but Gunderson saw a connection to Wendy, who dares to fly out the nursery window into the unknown.

“I found in Wendy an incredible bravery,” as well as curiosity, says the San Francisco-based playwright.

Gunderson also notes that the Edwardian roots of Barrie’s tale (whose iterations included a 1904 play and 1911 novel) roughly coincided with Marie Curie’s first Nobel Prize, in 1903. So a microscope- and telescope-besotted girl in that era would have had a role model. Gunderson says she imagined Wendy thinking, “I see a different world! It’s not here yet. I want to push it there!”

Gunderson, who has two young sons, says she also aimed to ensure that the classic story, “about boyhood and manhood,” included aspects of girlhood, womanhood, feminism and “the courage of feeling.”

Among other tinkering, she has eliminated a Barrie moment in which Wendy offers to kiss Peter Pan just after meeting him. “I’m sorry, this random boy just walked into your room and you want to give him a kiss?” the playwright muses. “I’m going to do a hard pass on that!”

An affable, confident presence, Gunderson can’t explain why she gravitated to theater. But she recalls that during a Georgia childhood that included an elementary school production of “Goldilocks” (she played Baby Bear), she was smitten with the power of onstage storytelling. She began writing plays in high school, and soon found inspiration in the history of science, thanks to a teacher who focused on the people behind groundbreaking discoveries.

About the time Gunderson entered Emory University, where she would major in English/creative writing — she later earned a master of fine arts degree from New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts — she wrote a play about the cosmologist Ralph Alpher. A follow-up centered on Isaac Newton.

But Gunderson experienced a creative Big Bang when she wrote a script about Émilie du Châtelet, an 18th-century French physicist. Spotlighting du Châtelet was so inspiring, Gunderson recalls, that she decided to prioritize female narratives. These days, motivated by what she calls a “ferocious feminism,” she sees significance in “just the act of saying, ‘Pay attention to this woman’s story!’ ”

“Émilie: La Marquise Du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight” premiered at California’s South Coast Repertory in 2009. A brainy piece, buoyed by comic repartee and a fantastical perspective (its heroine looks back on her career, and romance with Voltaire, from the afterlife), the play displays traits that distinguish many of Gunderson’s works: less well-known historical content; smart but accessible ideas entwined with story; brisk pacing; modern wit; and touches of ingenuity that stave off costume-drama stodginess.

“Her sense of whimsy, and her sense of humor, as well as her outrageously daring theatricality, are what I think really propel her popularity,” says Tom Prewitt, artistic and executive director of Avant Bard, which staged “Émilie” in 2017. That production, he says, garnered “one of the most passionate responses we’ve had in recent memory to a play.”

Gunderson’s Renaissance-woman sensibility surely works in her favor, helping her plays stand out in an era of professional specialization and niche interests. And her works pack in a lot of educational content without sacrificing emotion and human drama.

Seema Sueko, who is directing “Silent Sky” at Ford’s, says that by the end of that play, “I feel like I’ve gone on a full journey, having picked up something along the way — and satisfied my heart along the way, too.”

Gunderson’s husband, Nathan Wolfe, is a virologist, and she sometimes consults him on scientific details. “It’s very convenient to have a scientist husband when you’re writing science plays ” she says.

Not that she confines herself to that genre. Gunderson's best-known scripts — several of which have been produced locally — include "I and You," about contemporary teens, and "The Book of Will," about the creation of the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare's works. She has also written, with Margot Melcon, theatrical sequels to "Pride and Prejudice."

STC Associate Artistic Director Alan Paul, who is directing "Peter Pan and Wendy," saw "The Book of Will" at Round House Theatre in 2017. He admired Gunderson's ability to deploy many characters in what he calls a "symphonic" manner, and she came to mind when STC Artistic Director Simon Godwin expressed interest in launching the company's new family programming initiative with a version of Barrie's classic. Based on the scale of "The Book of Will," and Gunderson's humor and imagination, Paul thought she would be up to the task of adapting.

It was "Peter Pan and Wendy" and 30-plus other productions that landed Gunderson in the top slot in American Theatre magazine's ranking of this season's most-staged playwrights. She also held that title in 2017-18; last season, she was No. 2.

Gunderson isn't sure why her scripts are so popular. She just knows that she writes the kind of plays she wants to see — plays that "show me how to feel, show me how to survive, show me how to break down and get back up, show me how to hope in crisis."

And theater, she says, using a science analogy her characters might appreciate, is a kind of experiment — an experiment to "test the capacity of human feeling."

Peter Pan and Wendy, adapted by Lauren Gunderson from J.M. Barrie.
Through Jan. 12 at Sidney Harman Hall, 610 F St. NW.
shakespearetheatre.org.